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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 VIENTIANE 000366

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/06/2017
TAGS: [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KN](#) [KS](#) [LA](#)
SUBJECT: NEW GROUP OF NORTH KOREAN REFUGEES ARRESTED IN
VIENTIANE

REF: A. VIENTIANE 0337
[1](#)B. VIENTIANE 0329
[1](#)C. BESTIC-EMBASSY 05/04/07 E-MAIL

Classified By: AMBASSADOR PATRICIA M. HASLACH FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (S) Summary: Activists from the Human Rights Without Frontiers organization confirmed the presence to EmbOff of a new group of nine North Koreans in detention in Vientiane. The activists were able to deliver food and medicine to the detainees. The South Korean Embassy says resolving the case will not be done quickly: since the group members have been arrested, their release will require a process of negotiation over the amount of their "fines." End summary.

New Group of Detainees

[1](#)2. (S) P/E Chief met May 6 with regional representatives of Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) at their request. They confirmed that there is a new group of North Koreans currently at Khuk That Dam (the That Dam jail near the Embassy) that includes seven women and two children. They had been able to deliver food and medicines to the group on May 5. They told P/E Chief their understanding is that the South Korean Embassy is working to get this group released and is likely to be successful.

[1](#)3. (S) According to the HRWF group, having westerners show up at the jail to deliver supplies does not create any problem for the detainees. They feel the officials at the jail, like most Lao officials they have worked with, are generally sympathetic to the plight of the North Koreans. (One noted that even after bribes are paid, the Lao officials remain supportive and helpful rather than walking away once they have received their fees.) Nor do the HRWF activists feel any sense of threat from the Lao side.

South Korean Embassy Confirmation

[1](#)4. (S) ROK Embassy Counselor Miyon Lee (protect) confirmed to P/E Chief that her Embassy is working to assist in a resolution of this group's case. She predicted that it would not be very easy since the group members had been formally arrested. Currently the group members are "negotiating fees" for their release. How quickly they will be able to go through this process will depend on how much they are willing to pay, according to Lee.

Internet Publicity

15. (SBU) Note: The Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights (NKHR) has already publicized this case, circulating the information as part of a longer report May 3 and saying NKHR had sent the ROK MFA an appeal to intervene in this case. NKHR described the group as caught while trying to cross from Laos to Thailand. A North Korean refugee already resettled in South Korea had notified NKHR, asking for help for her sister and her sister's son who are part of this group (ref C).

The Overall Flow

16. (S) The HRWF activists told P/E Chief their organization has assisted about 90 North Koreans to pass through Laos during the past 12 months. The Japanese group Life Funds for North Korean Refugees (LFNKR -- whose secretary-general Kato Hiroshi issued the public statement last month complicating the release of the three North Korean children recently held in Laos -- refs A and B) probably assisted another 140. The HRWF activists noted that Mr. Kato is well respected and assessed his public comments, which they agreed did not help the case of the three children, as being a product of frustration.⁸

17. (S) In addition to HRWF and LFNKR, there is an additional Japanese group and four South Korean groups for a total of seven main groups which managed about 700 North Koreans passing through Laos during the past 12 months. The HRWF activists commented that there are now also a couple of new for-profit organizations. The activists estimated that in the previous 12 months (i.e., from mid-2005 to mid-2006) the seven groups may have handled 500-600. When P/E Chief

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asked about the reports the Embassy had seen which said the increased flow was even larger than an extra 100 persons per year, the HRWF group said this was true: there is an increased flow through China to the border area with Southeast Asian countries including Laos. There apparently is a fairly sizable -- and growing -- group of North Koreans waiting at the border for their turns to slip through the network.

The U.S. Connection

18. (S) P/E Chief stressed that any connection involving the United States would likely be unhelpful to the North Koreans -- including any attempt to come to the Embassy or mentioning the United States as the desired destination while still in Laos. He noted that the three children's case having dragged on for so long was probably because the United States had been mentioned as a destination. One of the HRWF activists said that most North Koreans are brainwashed to fear the United States, so the likelihood of them seeking a U.S. connection was slim. P/E Chief stressed that, if the refugees might want to go to the United States, they should wait to say this until they are in Bangkok, and the activists agreed.

Comment

19. (S) The HRWF activists appear professional and rational about their activities (which cover a broad range of countries (see www.hrwf.net)). The senior activist mentioned to P/E Chief he had been to Laos as many as a dozen times during the past several years -- without difficulty. They will ask their local representative, who manages the HRWF safe houses, to establish contact the Embassy, which will help us better monitor at least one part of the increasing North Korean refugee flow through Laos.

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